

Forest group aims to find balance

by Shana Neesvig

Is it possible for everyone to have a voice in managing 2.2 million acres of national forest lands? According to Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition (KFSC) the answer is a big yes! They also believe the "brightest days of northwest Montana are ahead of us."

The coalition is a partnership of Montana-made recreationists, business owners, conservationists and mill operators who have come together to find "common-ground" in managing public lands. They truly believe that these cherished lands belong to everyone, and everyone has vested interests in managing them as they see fit. Although these ideologies do not always mesh, the coalition respects everyone's ideas and feels compromise is the answer.

According to KFSC, they provide the Kootenai National

KOOTENAI FOREST STAKEHOLDERS COALITION

The coalition currently has 12 board members and they meet quarterly to discuss forest management. To contact the coalition or get more information, visit www.kootenaifuture.org.

Forest (KNF) with insights composed of a wide range of visions. KFSC's website states, "Between (the years of) 2012-2016, the KFSC provided local wisdom and professional insights to help the Kootenai Forest shape land management projects that provide raw material for wood products, and improve forest conditions and wildlife habitat. These collaborative projects have produced improved on-the-ground results and are able to avoid or withstand litigation."

The coalition works toward various goals while allowing motorized recreation in designated areas, target reaching timber harvest, and wildlife habitat conservation. Bringing all these together is achievable according to KFSC. The coalition does not intend to create more guidelines; in contrast they consider their works as "complementing the Kootenai Forest Plan, the Endangered Species Act, and other guiding laws" in order to reach a multi-use land management agreement.

Ensuring timber production, providing world-class recreation and protecting backcountry for future generations are three main objectives of KFSC. They believe successful balancing of these components will provide everyone a place in the KNF. Doug Ferrell, KFSC board member said, "I think this approach is very

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positive and encouraging in helping to improve

forest management". He continued, "It takes the focus off the more extreme viewpoints and to better represent the common sense middle ground shared by many with diverse viewpoints."

The local coalition is part of the Montana Forest Collaborative Network (MFCN), numerous groups statewide who collaborate with other groups and agencies in addressing public land issues. Gov. Steve Bullock will attend the second annual MFCN meeting in Missoula Nov. 6-7

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"Overcoming Adversity and Conflict" meeting agenda items include sharing collaboration processes currently taking place in various locations throughout Montana, fire funding, importance of collaboration and addressing legal challenges.

Successful stories of KFSC have encouraged the Plains/Thompson Falls Ranger District on the Lolo National Forest to